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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 000189

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: KUWAIT MEDIA REACTION JANUARY 8-12: BAKER
TRIP/IRAQ'S FOREIGN DEBT; IRAQ: KUWAIT ISLANDS; KUWAIT
CURRICULA REFORM; IRAN EARTHQUAKE AID

1. SUMMARY: Kuwaiti MPs and the head of the Shiite clerics in Kuwait have reacted angrily to the reported suggestion by the Vice President of Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress that Kuwait should lease two of its islands to Iraq to use as ports. The leading editorial in daily Al-Watan proclaims, "Kuwait will not allow a repeat of the ambitions of Saddam Hussein." In anticipation of James Baker's trip to Kuwait, a conservative writer states that any debt relief to Iraq should only be given in exchange for an equal value of reconstruction contracts for Kuwaiti companies.

A meeting between Embassy Political Counselor and the Secretary General of the conservative religious Salafi

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Movement was extensively reported in three Arabic dailies on January 9 with a full transcript of the conversation. The head of Shiite clerics in Kuwait, Baqer Al-Muhri, reportedly denounced the meeting in his Friday sermon, while one moderate Islamist writer praised the meeting as "a step in the right direction."

A government committee reviewing the Islamic studies curricula recommended the removal of a number of Quranic verses from the primary curriculum because they are "inappropriate to the age level." A conservative Islamist commentator states that those Kuwaitis supporting curriculum reform are complicit in an American "war to eradicate our identity." END SUMMARY.

2. News stories: Comments reported in all papers this week by the Vice President of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), Mudhar Shawkat, that Kuwait should lease to Iraq two Kuwaiti islands led to strong denunciations by Kuwaiti MPs, as reported by Al-Seyassah on January 9. Al-Rai Al-Aam reports that the head of the Shiite Clerics in Kuwait Baqer Al-Muhri opposed "leasing one inch of Kuwaiti land."

On January 9, Al-Rai Al-Aam, Al-Qabas and Al-Anba carried extensive coverage, including a full transcript, of a meeting between Political Counselor Richard Bell and the Secretary General of the conservative Salafi Movement

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(a.k.a. "Scientific Salafis"), Dr. Hakem Al-Mutairi. Al-Anba and Al-Seyassah report on January 10 that during his Friday sermon, head of the Shiite Clerics in Kuwait, Baqer Al-Muhri, strongly attacked the Salafi movement and its Secretary General for engaging in such a dialogue.

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Al-Rai Al-Aam reports on its January 12 front page that an Iraqi national detained attempting to enter Kuwait from Iraq was found to be carrying leaflets "calling for Jihad and killing the Americans" in Iraq and in Kuwait.

Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States, Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Sabah, announced that a Kuwaiti security delegation will visit Kuwaiti detainees at Guantanamo for four days to inspect their health and living conditions,

according to Al-Qabas, Al-Rai Al-Aam, and Al-Anba.

Al-Qabas reports that Ministry of Education Assistant Undersecretary for Curricula Affairs, Dr. Mohammed Al-Musaileem, stated that the Ministry does not have a budget for curriculum reform.

Al-Qabas also published the recommendations of the committee for reviewing the Kuwaiti Islamic Studies curricula, which include a recommendation to remove certain Quranic verses from primary school religion books because they are "not appropriate to this age level."

Editorials

13. "Iraqi Debts"

Conservative Dr. Sami Naser Khalifa wrote in independent Al-Rai Al-Aam (1/10): "James Baker will pay a visit to the Gulf countries including Kuwait to urge them to write off Iraqi debts long due to these countries. The issue of debts is considered a matter of sovereignty, therefore the Kuwaiti government has no right to unilaterally arbitrate the issue without referring it to the National Assembly. [T]he Kuwaiti government must lay a clear groundwork for dealing with the American guest by not allowing compromises. It is important that the government links writing off Iraqi debts to receiving [for Kuwaiti companies] contracts for reconstruction projects in Iraq of equivalent value."

14. "Hungry, but Chewing Gum"

Opening editorial in independent Al-Watan (1/12): "Iraq is in need of massive capital to rebuild its economy, and to rehabilitate and modernize its infrastructure. Building Iraqi harbors on Kuwaiti land is certainly not Iraq's top priority.' We say to the [Iraqi National Congress], . through your suggestion of leasing the [two Kuwaiti] islands, you are either trying to extort Kuwait for your own financial purposes, or to impose Iraqi sovereignty over Kuwaiti land. Kuwait will not allow a repeat of the ambitions of Saddam Hussein."

15. "War of Ideologies"

Salah Al-Sayer wrote in independent Al-Anba (1/11): "In the meeting which took place between the Secretary General of the Kuwaiti Salafi movement, and the head of the Political Section at the US embassy, the dialogue lacked a definition of the meaning of the 'state,' which differs in meaning in liberal Western political ideology and in the Arab political ideology. No matter how much the Salafi Secretary General talks about democracy, political parties and exchange of authority, the ideology of a secular state is totally rejected by the Salafis."

16. "The Salafi-American Meeting"

Moderate Islamist Faisal Al-Zamel wrote in independent Al-Anba (1/12): "The meeting which took place between members of the Salafi movement and the First Secretary at the American embassy is a step in the right direction. [Head of Shiite clerics in Kuwait] Al-Muhri's criticism of the Salafi meeting with the representatives of the American embassy makes me suspicious of the frequent meetings [Shiia] Islamist groups are having with the Americans, as the Americans have become a tangible reality in Iraq."

17. "Muslims Until Judgment Day"

Dr. Bahija Behbehani wrote in independent Al-Watan (1/10): "All [those Muslims] that attack and criticize curricula reform must recognize that a notable number of academics who are themselves Muslims will fearlessly defend the Islamic religion will not allow for any change in religious curricula. We are Muslims until Judgment Day."

18. "The War to Eradicate Identity"

Conservative Islamist Dr. Sami Khaled Khalifa wrote in independent Al-Rai Al-Aam (1/12): "For the past three years, [the American administration] has been very active in attempting to destroy our cultural identity, and to vilify the spirit of our religion. There are some [in Kuwait] who are trying to apply these American dictates, by pronouncing a need to amend the religious message, reform curricula, Westernize our culture and renounce terrorism according to the American principle stated by president Bush--'you are either with us or with terrorism.' We are in great need of a massive popular movement that will take up comprehensive political and economic reforms which reject American hegemony."

19. "The Culture of Eradication"

Malallah Yousef Malallah wrote in independent Al-Qabas (1/11): "This is not the time for political debate or ideological analysis [concerning Iran]. It is the time for humanitarian assistance so as to alleviate human suffering [of the earthquake victims]. We would have preferred for any American 'humanitarian' assistance to include the millions of American dollars [of Iranian assets], frozen in America for over twenty-four years, to be returned with interest to

Iran for reconstruction purposes."

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